
Citation:

Roy, P and Tremblay, G and Robertson, S and Houle, J (2015) "Do it All by Myself": A Salutogenic Approach of Masculine Health Practice Among Farming Men Coping With Stress. American journal of men's health. ISSN 1557-9883 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988315619677>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/2016/>

Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Title: “Do it all by myself”: a salutogenic approach of masculine health practice among farming men coping with stress

Abstract

Farming is often considered one of the most stressful occupations. At the same time, farming men symbolically represent a strong, traditional or hegemonic form of masculinity based on stoicism, resourcefulness and resilience to adversity. A contrast is observed between this social representation and their health status, marked by higher levels of stress, social isolation, psychological distress and suicide than many other subgroups of men. A salutogenic approach was taken in this study to enable the investigation of the social contexts in which farming men positively engage in health-promoting behaviors that may prevent or ameliorate mental health problems. A focus was placed on how farming men cope with stress on their own, and the relationship of this to their popular image of being resourceful and resilient. Thirty-two individual in-depth interviews with farming men and a focus group with five key informants working in rural areas within the Province of Quebec, Canada were carried out. Self-distraction and cognitive strategies emerged as the most relevant for participants. Notably, taking work breaks conflicted with the discourse of the ‘relentless worker’ that farmers are expected to be. Pathways to positive coping and recovery implied an ambivalence between contemplation of strategies aligned with negative aspects of traditional masculinity norms in North America and strategies aligned with more positive, progressive aspects of these norms based on the importance of family and work life balance. Health promotion and future research should investigate how various positive masculine practices can be aligned with farmers’ health and wellbeing and that of their family.

Keywords: men’s health; rural; stress coping; salutogenesis; masculinity; health promotion; Canada

Title: “Do it all by myself”: a salutogenic approach of masculine health practice among farming men coping with stress

Introduction

Farming men are a relevant group to observe in relation to the connections between gender and health. They symbolically represent a strong, traditional (or hegemonic) form of masculinity (Alston, 2012; Cambell, Mayerfeld Bell, & Finney, 2006; Price & Evans, 2009), similar to soldiers, professional athletes and firefighters (de Visser, Smith, & McDonnell, 2009; O'Brien, Hunt, & Hart, 2005). They are often depicted as strong, relentless workers, who are resilient, resourceful and stoic. Such qualities would theoretically privilege their health and wellbeing. Yet, in contrast to this symbolic representation, they are actually more likely to experience high levels of stress, social isolation, psychological distress and suicide than many other subgroups of rural and non-rural men (Fraser et al., 2005; Hawton, Simkin, & Malmberg, 1998; Judd et al., 2006; Kennedy, Maple, McKay, & Brumby, 2014). It is possible then that alignment with the agrarian values often linked with traditional masculinity norms has a major impact on farming men's poor mental health outcomes (Alston & Kent, 2008; Apesoa-Varano, Barker, & Hinton, 2015; Droz, Miéville-Ott, Jacques-Jouvenot, & Lafleur, 2014; Judd et al., 2006; Kølves, Milner, McKay, & De Leo, 2012; Sturgeon & Morrissette, 2010). However, other aspects of agrarian values, such as a sense of belonging and local social support, appear to be key elements of positive health and wellbeing among farmers (Greenhill, King, Lane, & MacDougall, 2009; Kutek, Turnbull, & Fairweather-Schmidt, 2011; McLaren & Challis, 2009). Critical perspectives on these connections and contradictions between agrarian values and traditional masculinity then raises questions about the social contexts in which farming men can positively engage in health-promoting behaviors that may prevent mental health problems. It is a nuanced view of these connections and contradictions,

and the positive steps farming men can and do take in relation to their mental wellbeing that forms the basis of this paper.

Conceptual framework

These issues are considered through the lens of a salutogenic approach which has become commonly understood and used in health promotion (Antonovsky, 1987; Lindström & Eriksson, 2012; Macdonald, 2005). Salutogenesis focusses on what pushes individuals and communities positively towards the *health* end of the *health & illness* continuum (Antonovsky, 1987). This approach is consistent with recent developments in men's health research (Macdonald, 2012). Historically in this field, there has been a strong focus on how male socialization generates negative influences on health, particularly on mental health and wellbeing in terms of lower sensitivity to symptoms of depression, reluctance to seek help, and radical and violent expressions of distress (see review by Gough, 2013). This thesis is notably supported by the influential work of Harrison (1978), Connell (1995); Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Courtenay (2000, 2011) amongst others. While these issues are very relevant and still require further investigation, this view of masculinity may mask more complex and sometimes contradictory social constructions of masculinity, or more precisely masculinities (Gough, 2013). A currently understudied topic are the various ways men positively engage with health practices and how these relate to more negative aspects of men's practices (Robertson & Williams, 2012).

In the context of men's health, some suggest that health behaviors are best understood as social practices by which men can demonstrate their level of conformity or resistance towards traditional masculinity norms, which hold a dominant position among discourses of masculinity. Robertson's (2007) model of men's health suggests that hegemonic masculinity requires that men should not show interest (at least publically) in their own health as health is a 'feminine' and

feminized concern. Further, hegemonic norms suggest that men should cope on their own with personal problems and engage with health services only as last resort and when strongly encouraged by others to do so. Men as ‘morally good’, responsible citizens are simultaneously expected to care for their own and their family’s health and wellbeing in alignment with ‘provider’ and ‘protector’ male roles. Men constantly negotiate health practices in relation to hegemonic masculinity norms, revealing movement and fluidity between the requirement to ‘not care’ and the requirement ‘to care’. ‘Doing health’ then is indeed a form of ‘doing gender’ (Saltonstall, 1993).

This study focuses on coping in the context of the adversity common to many farmers. These adverse events include stressful situations related to farms (accountability, bad weather, livestock illness and relentless work schedules), family-work reconciliation (work demands vs. aspiration to spend quality time with the family) and interpersonal issues (divorce, tension in the process of farm transfer, and conflicts with other farmers or community members). In these situations, a large array of manifestations of stress are self-reported from physiological symptoms - like fatigue, muscular tension, appetite and weight imbalance - to more severe experiences of irritability, emotional outbursts, panic attacks, depression, suicidal ideation and suicide. This set of symptoms is consistent with empirical studies and reviews on stress among farmers (Garnham & Bryant, 2014; Raine, 1999; Robertson, Elder, & Coombs, 2010; Roy, Tremblay, Oliffe, Jbilou, & Robertson, 2013; H. V. Thomas et al., 2003). Stress coping among farmers is gaining increasing research attention, particularly in relation to their help-seeking and service use (or misuse) when experiences reach crisis level. While such work is crucial and necessary, the conceptual framework used here shifts the focus towards health promotion and the positive coping mechanisms that some farmers use in these stressful situations. A study by McLaren & Challis (2009) reveals that social support and a sense of belonging can buffer the effects of stress. While these two elements concern

the contribution of community to stress reduction, little attention has so far been paid to how farming men cope with stress on their own, and the relationship of this to their popular image of being resourceful and resilient. This paper therefore investigates the contribution of coping strategies displayed by farming men beyond the support provided by significant others or professionals. Salutogenesis and critical men's health approaches have guided the analysis in order to illuminate the subjective experiences relating to a combination of masculinities and agrarian social norms and the impact of these on farming men's mental health practices. Combining a salutogenic approach with critical men's health studies enables us to consider under-investigated connections between masculinities and coping; particularly the positive health practices used to maintain wellbeing and avoid mental health problems.

Method

This research is based on 32 individual in-depth interviews with farming men and a focus group with five key informants working in rural areas, including mental health community practitioners, a suicide prevention volunteer and a farming union advisor, all within the Province of Quebec, Canada. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Council of (*University blinded for peer review*). All interviews were completed by the first author who has no background in farming and important preparation was therefore necessary to bridge this gap and create the necessary trust with research participants. Exploratory discussions were undertaken with key informants such as rural doctors, agronomists, farming union representatives and farmers involved in suicide prevention. Farming-focussed publications were read, TV shows watched and farming fairs attended. Advertisement for recruitment to the study was done with the help of these key informants, and through email chains and media interviews. Two participants were recruited

through a snowball technique following these earlier contacts. Selection criteria for the study, highlighted in the advertisement, were; *being a farming man, aged between 25 to 64 years old, experiencing any level of stress (low to high), speaking French*. Twenty-eight participants completed the interview at home / farm, two on the phone and one at a university with the choice of venue being of the participants choosing. On arrival at each participant's home and farm, the interviewer asked if they could tour the farm prior to the interview. This helped establish a conversational tone, positioned the participant as the expert in their own life and demonstrated an interest in what interests him. Again, this was an important part of the process of establishing trust which is particularly important in health research with men (Deslauriers & Deslauriers, 2010; Oliffe & Mroz, 2005). Informed consent was taken prior to the interview commencing. The interview schedule covered areas around the participants farming background and their experience of stress and adversity. All interviews were digitally recorded. Debriefing was done after each interview and a list of mental health and other resources provided. Interviews were subsequently transcribed and coded using NVivo. Following the guidelines of a general inductive approach (D. R. Thomas, 2003), analysis included deductive processes (based on the research objectives) and inductive processes (data interpretation). Analysis started immediately following the first interview and continued throughout allowing the approach to be amended and improved (including adjusting the interview guide) in line with suggestions by Miles and Huberman (1994). Initial coding reflected the themes provided in the interview guide. Further analytical interpretation subsequently emerged from the data through considering its relation to the theoretical framework and the research question. Such an approach, where there is a cyclical relationship between data and theory, has been aligned with the process of 'abductive reasoning' (Blaikie, 1993) and has been well utilised previously on research around men and health (e.g. Robertson, 2003). Saturation

was achieved around the 15th interview as the number of new categories diminished. At this point, analysis focused on challenging interpretations and searching for alternative content (deviant cases) among the data. The overall research process meet generally accepted validity criteria for qualitative research: audit trail, credibility, integrity and sensitivity (Shek, Tang, & Han, 2005; Turcotte, F.-Dufour, & Saint-Jacques, 2009; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). The interview techniques included many reformulations to assure proper understanding of the participants' point of view and triangulation was possible with the key informants' focus group being useful for discussing the appropriateness of the links between data and interpretations, as well as in helping with recommendations for knowledge translation into practice and policy (*Author, 2015*).

Results

Consistent with their social image of resourceful men, participants disclosed a wide range of coping strategies to maintain their wellbeing and avoid mental health problems. The first section discusses self-distraction strategies such as work breaks, followed by a set of cognitive strategies that form the second theme. The third section discusses substance abuse, social withdrawal and suicide, which are often referred to as 'maladaptive coping strategies'. The analysis generated a focus on self-distraction and cognitive strategies as these emerged as the most relevant for participants both quantitatively (in terms of the number of times they were mentioned) and qualitatively (in terms of the importance participants placed on them). Notably, most attention is devoted to work breaks because, more than any other themes or sub-themes, it emerged as being particularly in conflict with the discourse of what farmers are expected to be. Finally, strategies with negative outcomes are briefly presented.

Between necessity and acceptability: positioning work breaks and vacations as gender issues

Farming, and especially working with livestock, is very intensive and often requires working seven days a week. This was especially true for the farmers interviewed as all have family-size farms with no or few employees, which is a common reality in Québec and a contrast to the larger industrialized farms in the Canadian Prairies Provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba), or the United States. Additionally, the proximity of the house and the farm created a constant presence at work; that is, there is very little geographical work/home separation creating a psychological feeling of constantly being ‘on call’. In this context, one of the most crucial coping strategies was having work breaks and a vacation plan. This generally meant paying an employee or having an agreement within the family or with another farmer to take such breaks. The farmers were unanimous on the necessity of breaks while simultaneously recognizing the prevailing discourse that farmers should work all the time. This created a situation where such breaks then become stigmatised. Simon, a thirty year-old dairy farmer living in a remote region, explains this dilemma:

Many farmers don’t take any vacations but I often go South. I did three one-week trips last year. What I do is highly stigmatised, so at the town’s coffee shop I only declare one trip and remain quiet about the others. My friends say: “you spoil yourself, why don’t you work?” I let them talk because I know during summer I work very hard sometimes 100 hours a week so I earn these vacations. My house is next to the farm so I always keep an eye on it to see if everything is ok. To disengage, I have to leave. I get picked on because of that. (Simon, dairy farmer).

There is then a contradiction experienced by the farmers who resisted the social pressure to present themselves as intense and relentless workers yet who also recognised the pressure exerted (often by farming peers) to live up to such an image. Denis, a corn farmer in his fifties explains how this social pressure is reinforced in farmers' assemblies:

It's weird, I already saw a guy winning the farming gold medal. He went to the stage and proudly said he had never taken any holiday in his life. Then he got loudly applauded. I never had a gold medal, am I lazy? There is something wrong. Last year, I did a snowmobile trip with some friends. I cried inside of me the whole time, telling myself I shouldn't be here, I should be working relentlessly, earning money. I have no right to be here. You punish yourself, you think you are lazy (Denis, corn farmer).

This experience had a negative impact on Denis's ability to cope by taking breaks because it positions his own holidays as illegitimate and they are therefore experienced with shame and guilt rather than with the pleasure that should bring the necessary rest and relaxation. This dilemma - between the necessity of work breaks and its negative view among other farmers - is perceived as a norm generally recognized by all farmers but simultaneously transgressed by many of them.

Interviewer (Int.): Are vacations necessary?

Pascal (dairy farmer): Yes yes [laughs].

Int.: Are vacations positively perceived?

Pascal: Hmm... not all the time, no. My brother and I have a weekend off out of two but my father said it should only be on Sunday [laughs] and he was serious. It bugged him because we took one weekend out of two.

At one point, Sylvain, a farmer in his late fifties suggests with some humour that vacations were “invented” by the younger generation of farmers. He expresses the difference between the mentality of his generation, based on relentless work, and that of the new generation, being more focussed on a balance between work, leisure and family.

Sylvain (fruit and vegetable grower): It changes, well my generation – I am near sixty – and even those before us, it was worse, breaks just didn’t exist on a farm. We begin... well personally, I started to learn breaks must be taken. But the new generation who’s forty years-old, it’s another approach.

Int.: How did you discover that breaks “existed”, that it was ok?

Sylvain: Now I know [laugh]. I’ve known for a long time that it exists... but the right to take it, that’s another story. We always have the impression we will have too much work after [a break]. I could work 24/7 and never get through everything so it is better to stop and come back in a better shape. At one point, I realized it’s not only the body, my head too didn’t keep up at this pace. I was exhausted, got to get out of this. My children are now old enough to take care of the farm when I am away.

Despite the stigma mentioned above, all farmers interviewed agreed with the benefits of work breaks and vacations. Most of them were very critical of the work habits of their father’s generation based around a ‘relentless work’ ethic and its negative impact on their health. A multi-production farmer in his early forties explains.

My dad worked all his life, all the time, and what did it do? Not much. He is 71 and his shoulders are worn out, he’s got something wrong with his hip. Did he benefit from it? Yes, he built a nice business, it’s ok but it’s not all about the business. My social worker told me

“there is a guy with a good business, when it goes wrong, he leaves on vacation and when he comes back, he comes back with solutions”. And that’s true I did the same this year (Bernard, multi-production).

Also, the father’s relationship to vacations is compared with someone who stops smoking, highlighting that this habit is not seen as “natural” among farmers and learning to disengage from the farm is a long process.

When my dad took vacations, it was two days and it was a record. It could be seen in his behaviour, like someone who stops smoking. He wasn’t particularly nice when we left for two days. It generated conflict because he was there [on vacation] physically but not mentally. Mentally he was still there [at the farm]. I mean, I fought a bit against this with my own vacations. I had to learn to disengage, it wasn’t natural I haven’t been raised that way (Louis, wine grower).

This point of view was consistent across all interviews. Mathieu is a dairy farmer in his late twenties waiting for a second child and is very representative of the younger farmers’ relationship to work:

Our generation, we shouldn’t expect that working 40 hours per week should be enough. Yes, we work on weekends and finish past 7:30 PM most days. Every guy recognizes that. What differentiates us [from the previous generation] is the will to have steady breaks to spend with your partner, your children, doing activities other than that. That’s the most difficult, to reconcile the farm with the family. We succeed at it better than our parents but it is still tough (Mathieu, dairy farmer).

It would be wrong to assume *all* older farmers embrace this relentless work ethic. It is true that most farmers never really retire when the next generation takes a greater role in the family business and it is common to see older men still assuming some chores on the farm. This is consistent with the fact that their interests tended to remain centrally focussed around farming. However, as some farmers explained, their father's often started to take vacations and travel after the farm transfer (passing on control of the farm).

My dad is over 65 and he still milks the cows, only in the morning though, I do the evening shift. But my dad doesn't only do farming, he travels a lot. He spent three weeks in Asia, and other time in Southern USA. That enables us to see vacations positively (Simon, dairy farmer).

The enlargement of modern farms was also seen to make it easier to establish a break schedule, such as one weekend out of two, enabling them to 'recharge the batteries'. In the same sense, technological improvement facilitates a better quality of life as reported by Isaac, a dairy farmer in his thirties, whose large family farm is structured with five members, giving him the opportunity to work less than the average farmer:

Nowadays we're more mechanized. That's why I have the time to take a beer. It's also because of the work schedule. But it's mainly because of technology. The farm runs seven days per week. One year I worked at Christmas, the next one it's on New Year's Eve and the next one is neither (Isaac, dairy farmer).

Thus, evolution of farming technologies and a shifting economy was said to enable a more balanced reconciliation between work, family and leisure. Other views suggested that whilst farms of the past employed a whole family, farmers are presently more likely to work alone. This

isolation can reinforce isolation and therefore represents a risk to mental wellbeing. In sum, the majority of farmers interviewed experienced a dilemma regarding two seemingly contradictory moral challenges. On one hand is the relentless farmer who never takes any vacations and sacrifices his body to work, as their father's generation used to do. On the other hand, most farmers aspire to an alternative work ethic in which work breaks and vacations are positioned as a wise and efficient way to reconcile productivity and provide a better quality of family life.

It is relevant to note what these farmers do during those breaks in order to promote their well-being. Some activities enabled participants to be far away from the worries of the farm, such as playing ice hockey in a farmers' league. This league is organized according to farmers' atypical work schedule. Sport and physical activities play an important role in maintaining a balance, especially when it comes to social activities. Some leisure activities are rooted into the rural culture such as rodeo (practicing and watching) and line dancing. For others, work breaks were spent in social activities such as dinning at restaurants, going out dancing or volunteering. Many participants highlighted the importance of family among farmers and time spent with children was described as a particularly powerful barrier to adversity.

You can have a bad day on the farm: bad weather, injury. A children's laugh, a hug from those little arms can wipe away everything accumulated during the day. You've gotta be able to catch the moment, finding one small positive piece somewhere and hanging on to it (Yvon, dairy farmer).

A powerful discourse amongst the participants positioned family ties as the best form of support possible. Some of them expressed the view that family is more valued among farmers than it is amongst the population in general. Whilst this is clearly a contestable view it nevertheless

highlights the importance that these farmers gave to the role of their families in sustaining their mental wellbeing. But they also displayed coping strategies on their own, at the cognitive level.

Focussing on cognitive strategies with positive outcomes

According to the vast majority of farmers interviewed (29 of the 32 interviewed), one of the best coping strategies was being able to take a positive long term perspective of both the farm and their family circumstances. Although not quantitative in nature, as Silverman (2001, p. 35) points out numbers such as these can be helpful in qualitative work as they give a sense of the strength of a particular theme or issue. Olivier, a lamb farmer, was one of the strongest advocates of taking a positive attitude in farming as a means of surviving tough times. This attitude was important in this context as, in Canada, lamb is considered an expensive product with prices varying greatly from year to year often leaving farmers with financial pressures:

The investments are massive actually. I am on the edge, exhausted and I have a wonderful business. I probably have the most beautiful lamb flock in the region because I know them all. My technical results [health of the flock] are excellent, not financially yet, but I can explain all of them [deficits] and still, I am exhausted. It takes everything to motivate me and keep on going... but I know I have only a few months like this. We must learn to live on hope and optimism, not dreams (Olivier, lamb farmer).

Olivier displays a good performance technically, in the care and knowledge of his lambs and therefore the quality of what he produced, but this did not always lead to financial success. This situation was shared with other farmers who aimed to produce quality products for highly ranked restaurants. Such objectives generated social benefits (good reputation), but could simultaneously jeopardize the businesses profitability. Likewise, Louis, a wine grower, who went through tough

times building his business, echoed this need for a positive perspective in light of difficult and competitive trading markets. His point of view is clearly aligned with the importance of optimism as an essential skill for farming.

I think I am someone naturally very optimistic and it has helped me enormously. I am not naturally a depressive person, I could have been though! (...) I try to talk about the good things rather than the bad ones (Louis, wine grower).

Similarly, participants were prone to take the drama out of situations, notably through humour and by looking at past experiences of successful coping which provided confidence and hope. Also, positive reframing as described above was commonly associated with a strong focus on strategic planning. Many participants highlighted their business management skills in this regard. But the most important aspect in carrying on through tough times was their passion for agriculture and the time they took to appreciate it.

My strength is that I am a guy who loves being outdoors, animals, machinery, land and soil. Like tonight, it's sunny and it's going to smell of warm grass. I am going to sit on the porch, take a deep breath. It will recharge my batteries. I like this (Bernard, multi-producer).

This passion for agriculture was closely aligned with taking pride in 'feeding the world'. This responsibility was highly valued by the farmers and was one of the main motivators to carry on during tough times. Organic farmers pushed this motivation further with a strong emphasis on quality and ethics. Such is the case for Eric. He runs an organic farm focussed on quality rather than financial benefits. Despite the suicidal ideations he associates with financial problems, he considers farming very significant. His motivation is fuelled by the pride of producing food that considered suitable for the country's best restaurants.

Years ago, I thought about suicide. I still think about it sometimes when I am exhausted, sickened of the financial stress (...) [But] I'm happy about feeding people properly, having a product beyond the market's standards. I sell to [*Restaurant*]. The other day I brought my kids there to sensitize them: "see, our product, our name is on the menu". That's wicked! Back on the farm, this recognition and client's testimonies boosts me. I don't do it for the money, but to feed myself, my family and people who choose our organic food (Eric, organic farmer).

This pride in food provision has also been expressed outside interviews. Driving across the countryside during data collection the interviewer noticed many roadside billboards in fields "*Pas de nourriture sans agriculture*" (no food without farming). It is a part of a national campaign to promote the value of farming by the *Union des producteurs agricoles* (farming union). Thus, many farmers countered the strains of farming with an emphasis on the pride and value of their work at a personal and social scale. In addition, within these cognitive strategies, three participants found guidance and hope in prayer. For instance, Sebastien is a farmer and father in his mid-forties. He surrounds himself with many sources of support: technical advisors, a business coach and God. He explains the role of religion in his coping.

As a kid, I went to the Sunday church. I may not be the most religious man around but I have learnt ways to seek help through prayer. I found strength and resilience when things are bad (Sebastien, dairy farmer).

While this discourse was shared by some farmers, the wide majority positioned themselves as too "grounded" or rationale to put their hope in religious support. Thus, within and in addition to the quotes above, most participants valued the crucial importance of optimism, resilience, solution-

focussed and long-term perspectives. But some strategies could lead to negative outcomes as they have been experienced by participants themselves or people around them.

Distancing from strategies with negative outcomes

Strategies, like drug and alcohol abuse, social withdrawal and suicide are, understandably, not considered as positive (or socially acceptable) options for coping with adversity and are generally referred to as ‘maladaptive coping’ mechanisms. However, many of the participants had some experience of these if not personally then amongst their farming peers. The theme of suicide was not specifically raised but emerged from five participants who had contemplated or attempted suicide. They expressed ambivalence between despair and hope which, thankfully, in these cases favors the latter. Ludovic had been through many stressful issues such as prison and financial problems. Despite this adversity, he remained clear about the non-sense of suicide as an option when the wider consequences are considered.

I was getting into legal problems, I devalued myself... didn't believe in anything, no hope. Suicide seems like a miracle solution. At the same time, a friend committed suicide. Then, I thought about my kids. A gesture like this leaves consequences. It's not the inheritance I want to leave them with. Lately, some teenagers committed suicide in surrounding towns. It shook me hard, there are other things in life than problems (Ludovic, maple producer).

Ludovic's discourse was shared by all participants who experienced suicidal ideation. Such thoughts are a common outcome of the many issues farmers can face: bankruptcy, farm fire, accident, family crisis, divorce. However, substance abuse, social isolation and suicide were seen by the farmers themselves as having a detrimental impact on their family, business, livestock and

community. Therefore, what seems to be a potential solution, or coping mechanism, in time of despair was recognised as most likely making situations worse, as these participants explain.

Alcohol is not a solution, it only adds other problems (Jocelyn, dairy farmer).

Drinking is not a winning solution because you know you are going to hit a wall. It's gonna explode in your relationship, business or within yourself (Sebastien, dairy farmer).

These two participants, along with many others, shared the same point of view although coming from different experiential backgrounds. Jocelyn got very depressed, dysfunctional and suicidal in a context of social isolation. For him, emotional attachment to the flock, and the pride of taking care of these animals, contributed to him rejecting suicide as a possible solution and to him seeking professional help. In contrast, Sebastien displayed a very confident attitude regarding farming stress. He explained his resilience in relation to his strong sense of self-management and his positive outlook and perspective. This rationale connects with participants' general prioritization of strategies that generate positive rather than negative outcomes.

Discussion

This study aims to better understand the connections between various masculinity practices, farming practices and health-promoting behaviours. Farmers are generally seen as resourceful and these findings identified ways in which they coped with adversity. A reinterpretation of the social norms of the farmer as a relentless worker seemed a key element in maintaining a good mental health balance. Results support prior observations by Robertson (2007) examining how coping strategies are mainly orientated on 'instrumental action' (doing) rather than 'communicative action' (talk) for men when dealing with stressful and emotional issues. These mechanisms include cognitive (i.e. optimism) and management actions (breaks). It might be

possible that farmers engage these emotional coping strategies as a last resort, such as during a crisis situation like a break-up or bankruptcy (*Author, 2014*). Cognitive strategies can be positioned both as conforming to or resisting traditional masculine norms. They can be interpreted as ways of demonstrating control, at least publically, over adversity. There are situations where optimism may be actioned as a strategy to hide or mask problems and mental health symptoms. This pattern is highlighted in the gap found between Canadian and European men's positive self-evaluated health with epidemiological data reporting high levels of mental health morbidity (European Commission, 2011; Tremblay, Cloutier, Antil, Bergeron, & Lapointe-Goupil, 2005). Similarly, in the UK, men often self-report their health as better than women even when the levels of symptoms are similar. However, optimism could equally be interpreted in relation to positive acts of perseverance and endurance; attributes of pride amongst farmers can be mobilised to overcome adversity with confidence and resilience.

Consistent with a stereotype of farming men is the general assumption that they embody many traditional masculinity norms. Consequently, they may also be expected to favour some more negative masculine coping strategies - such as substance abuse, social isolation and suicide - as many studies suggest (Alston, 2012; Alston & Kent, 2008; Courtenay, 2006; Garnham & Bryant, 2014; Hawton et al., 1998; Judd et al., 2006; Sturgeon & Morrisette, 2010; H. V. Thomas et al., 2003). While this no doubt holds true in some contexts, findings reported here suggest important nuances. Pathways to positive coping and recovery may imply an ambivalence between contemplation of strategies aligned with negative aspects of traditional masculinity norms or strategies aligned with more positive, progressive aspects of these norms based on the importance of family and work life balance. The challenge in public health is to find ways to reduce farmers

(and other men's) engagement with the former, negative, strategies and facilitate engagement in these latter, more positive strategies.

The psychosocial benefits of work breaks are well known in numerous professional sectors (Brown, Ling, Bradley, Lingard, & Townsend, 2009) but there is a cultural contradiction between the glorification of work and a devaluation of leisure (Zijlstra & Sonnentag, 2006) and findings here suggest this holds true for farmers. Work breaks become salient to farmers health practices and how these link to configurations of masculinity because of the tension between the recognised benefits of such breaks and the stigma that this can generate. To manage this, some took these necessary breaks but tended to hide them from the public eye, or at least from their peers. This suggests that social pressure still persists amongst the farmers to demonstrate, at least publically, total dedication to the time spent on farm work. Taking a salutogenic approach enables a focus on processes promoting strategies with positive outcomes. Within this approach, the acceptability of work breaks can be negotiated and legitimated by aligning this coping strategy with the increased value that comes from a better quality of life, and an improved balance and reconciliation between work, family and leisure. It implies that farmers can depart from the potentially damaging, wholly relentless work ethic largely valued by their fathers' generation and, to a lesser extent by younger farmers too. Strategies to negotiate the stigma attached to work breaks, such as hiding it from the public eye or valuing it, could be interpreted by inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson, 2005, 2009). This suggests that each man constructs his own masculinity by adopting a number of socially valued norms and rejecting others according to a very personal assessment of what is appropriate and what is not. Work and family balance seems to be more strongly valued by younger farmers, a trend observed also among young rural Norwegian men who often distance themselves from many traditional masculine norms (Bye, 2009). In addition, many older farmers are also now

questioning the value of the relentless work ethic which suggests it is not just a generational clash but an ongoing process of wider cultural change across and within age groups and individuals.

The results and discussion within this paper should be considered within a set of limitations. Some of these limitations are inherent within the qualitative method used. Despite efforts to create a climate of trust and confidence within the interviews, social desirability might still have influenced what participants decided to disclose or not and the way they chose to disclose issues; that is the language and tone they used to tell their story. Coding was completed solely by the first author. Constant attention to diversity in participants' discourses, and extensive discussions between authors through the subsequent stages of analysis and interpretation, aimed to protect against selectivity in the use of data. Even with multiplication of means of recruitment, the sample remained sociologically homogeneous (that is in terms of national and cultural background, ethnicity). This is most likely to be due to homogeneity among farming men in the province of Quebec. Nonetheless, this method enabled an in-depth examination of an issue through the conceptual and theoretical creativity typical to qualitative research.

Conclusion

Farming men in this study displayed a variety of coping strategies, aligned with or resistant to traditional masculinity norms. The findings suggest certain implications for future research. The theoretical framework of salutogenesis enables the investigation of men's health beyond the sole relationship between a deficit model of masculinity and negative mental health outcomes. It further advocates the development of future research on health-promoting behaviours among other subgroups of men (rural and non-rural men for instance). Overall, the salutogenic approach helped

guide the research process towards new results and interpretations about stress-related coping strategies for farming men outside psychosocial-based interventions. It brought attention to key-elements of health promotion and the prevention of mental health problems amongst this group of men. For example, in practice, the implications of this work suggest that the development of farm stress support should start with farming men's desire and pride in resourcefulness. Services can be (re)presented as tools for boosting the men's own resilience against adversity rather than as being seen as a replacement when their own self-coping techniques have failed. A further major aspect is the importance of addressing directly the acceptability of work breaks. Some community services are already aligned in this direction, such as a replacement program providing farm staff to enable farmers to take a break once in a while. These could be complemented with a social media campaign highlighting the positive benefits that accrue to farming families when they enjoy time away together. The very existence of such services publicly demonstrates that work breaks are a "real", legitimate, issue for farmers and thereby help normalise it and construct its social acceptability. Linked to this, it seems crucial to also directly address and question the pride in embodying the stereotype of the relentless worker. Deconstructing this aspect of traditional masculinity norms among farmers will likely help create greater social acceptability of a variety of (hopefully more positive) masculine practices aligned with farmers' health and wellbeing and that of their families as well.

References

- Alston, M. (2012). Rural male suicide in Australia. *Social Science & Medicine*, 74(4), 515-522. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2010.04.036

- Alston, M., & Kent, J. (2008). The Big Dry: The link between rural masculinities and poor health outcomes for farming men. *Journal of Sociology*, 44(2), 133-147.
- Anderson, E. (2005). Orthodox and Inclusive Masculinity: Competing Masculinities among Heterosexual Men in a Feminized Terrain. *Sociological Perspectives*, 48(3), 337-355. doi: 10.1525/sop.2005.48.3.337
- Anderson, E. (2009). *Inclusive masculinity the changing nature of masculinities*. New York: Routledge.
- Antonovsky, A. (1987). *Unraveling the mystery of health : how people manage stress and stay well* (1st ed.). San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.
- Apesoa-Varano, E. C., Barker, J. C., & Hinton, L. (2015). Shards of sorrow: Older men's accounts of their depression experience. *Social Science & Medicine*, 124(0), 1-8. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.10.054>
- Blaikie, N. W. H. (1993). *Approaches to social enquiry*. Cambridge [England]: Polity Press in association with Blackwell.
- Brown, K. A., Ling, S., Bradley, L. M., Lingard, H., & Townsend, K., J. (2009). *What about me? Avoiding fatigue and gaining personal time in the work to leisure transition in work-life balance initiatives*. Paper presented at the 23rd Annual Australia and New Zealand Academy of Management Conference (ANZAM 2009), Southbank, Melbourne.
- Bye, L. M. (2009). 'How to be a rural man': Young men's performances and negotiations of rural masculinities. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 25(3), 278-288.
- Cambell, H., Mayerfeld Bell, M., & Finney, M. (2006). *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender & Society*(19), 829-859.
- Courtenay, W. H. (2000). Constructions of masculinity and their influence on men's wellbeing: a theory of gender & health. *Social Science & Medicine*(50), 1385-1401.
- Courtenay, W. H. (2006). Rural men's health: situating risk in the negotiation of masculinity. In H. Cambell, M. Mayerfeld Bell, & M. Finney (Eds.), *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Courtenay, W. H. (2011). *Dying to be men*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- de Visser, R. O., Smith, J. A., & McDonnell, E. J. (2009). 'That's not masculine' Masculine capital and health-related behaviors. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 14(7), 1047-1058.
- Deslauriers, J.-P., & Deslauriers, J.-M. (2010). La recherche auprès des hommes: défis et enjeux [research with men: challenges and issues]. In J.-M. Deslauriers, G. Tremblay, S. Genest-Dufault, D. Blanchette, & J.-Y. Desgagnés (Eds.), *Regards sur les hommes et les masculinités [Perspectives on men and masculinities]* (pp. 153-176). Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Droz, Y., Miéville-Ott, V., Jacques-Jouvenot, D., & Lafleur, G. (2014). *Agriculture familiale et santé publique; une anthropologie comparée des politiques agricoles francophones : France-Québec-Suisse [Family farming and public health; a comparative anthropology of francophone farming policies: France-Province of Quebec-Switzerland]*. Paris: Karthala.
- European Commission. (2011). *The state of men's health in Europe*. Luxembourg: European Commission.
- Fraser, C. E., Smith, K. B., Judd, F., Humphreys, J. S., Fragar, L. J., & Henderson, A. (2005). Farming and mental health problems and mental illness. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 51(4), 340-349. doi: 10.1177/0020764005060844
- Garnham, B., & Bryant, L. (2014). Problematising the Suicides of Older Male Farmers: Subjective, Social and Cultural Considerations. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 54(2), 227-240. doi: 10.1111/soru.12029
- Gough, B. (2013). The psychology of men's health: Maximizing masculine capital. *Health Psychology*, 32(1), 1-4. doi: 10.1037/a0030424
- Greenhill, J., King, D., Lane, A., & MacDougall, C. (2009). Understanding resilience in South Australian farm families. *Rural Society*, 19(4), 318-325.

- Harrison, J. (1978). Warning: The male sex role may be dangerous to your health. *Journal of Social Issues*, 34(1), 65-86. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.1978.tb02541.x
- Hawton, K., Simkin, S., & Malmberg, A. (1998). *Suicide and stress in farmers*. London: Stationery Office.
- Judd, F., Jackson, H., Fraser, C., Murray, G., Robins, G., & Komiti, A. (2006). Understanding suicide in Australian farmers. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 41(1), 1-10. doi: 10.1007/s00127-005-0007-1
- Kennedy, A. J., Maple, M. J., McKay, K., & Brumby, S. A. (2014). Suicide and accidental death in Australia's rural farming communities: a review of the literature. *Rural Remote Health*, 14(1), 2517.
- Kölves, K., Milner, A., McKay, K., & De Leo, D. (2012). Suicide in rural and remote areas of Australia. Mt Gravatt, Qld: Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention.
- Kutek, S., Turnbull, D., & Fairweather-Schmidt, A. K. (2011). Rural men's subjective well-being and the role of social support and sense of community: evidence for the potential benefit of enhancing informal networks. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 19(1), 20-26.
- Lindström, B., & Eriksson, M. (2012). *La salutogenèse. Petit guide pour promouvoir la santé*. Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Macdonald, J. (2005). *Environments for health : a salutogenic approach*. London ; Sterling, VA: Earthscan.
- Macdonald, J. (2012). *The Need to Change Our Way of Looking at Men's Health: Australian Perspectives*. Paper presented at the Future perspectives for intervention, policy and research on men and masculinities: an international forum, Quebec City.
- McLaren, S., & Challis, C. (2009). Resilience among men farmers: the protective roles of social support and sense of belonging in the depression-suicidal ideation relation. *Death Studies*, 33(3), 262-276.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis : an expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks ; London ; New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- O'Brien, R., Hunt, K., & Hart, G. (2005). 'It's caveman stuff, but that is to a certain extent how guys still operate': men's accounts of masculinity and help seeking. *Social Science & Medicine*, 61(3), 503-516. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2004.12.008
- Oliffe, J., & Mroz, L. (2005). Men interviewing men about health and illness: ten lessons learned. *Journal of Men's Health and Gender*, 2(2), 257-260.
- Price, L., & Evans, N. (2009). From stress to distress: Conceptualizing the British family farming patriarchal way of life. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 25(1), 1-11. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2008.03.008>
- Raine, G. (1999). Causes and effects of stress on farmers: a qualitative study. *Health Education Journal*, 58, 259-270.
- Robertson, S. (2003). 'If I let a goal in, I'll get beat up': contradictions in masculinity, sport and health. *Health Education Research*, 18(6), 706-716. doi: 10.1093/her/cyf054
- Robertson, S. (2007). *Understanding Men and Health: Masculinities, Identity and Well-being*. Breshire: Open University Press.
- Robertson, S., Elder, K., & Coombs, R. (2010). Rural men's mental health. In D. Conrad & A. White (Eds.), *Promoting men's mental health* (pp. 57-73). Oxford, UK: Radcliff.
- Robertson, S., & Williams, R. (2012). *The importance of retaining a focus on masculinities in future studies on men and health*. Paper presented at the Future perspectives for intervention, policy and research on men and masculinities: an international forum, Quebec City.
- Roy, P., Tremblay, G., Oliffe, J. L., Jbilou, J., & Robertson, S. (2013). Male farmers with mental health disorders: a scoping review. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 21(1), 3-7. doi: 10.1111/ajr.12008
- Saltonstall, R. (1993). Healthy bodies, social bodies: Men's and women's concepts and practices of health in everyday life. *Social Science & Medicine*, 36(1), 7-14. doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(93\)90300-S](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(93)90300-S)

- Shek, D. T. L., Tang, V. M. Y., & Han, X. Y. (2005). Evaluation of Evaluation Studies Using Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Work Literature (1990-2003): Evidence That Constitutes a Wake-Up Call. *Research on Social Work Practice, 15*(3), 180-194. doi: 10.1177/1049731504271603
- Silverman, D. (2001). *Interpreting qualitative data : methods for analysing talk, text and interaction 2nd Ed.* London: Sage Publications.
- Sturgeon, R., & Morrisette, P. J. (2010). A qualitative analysis of suicide ideation among Manitoban farmers. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy, 44*(2), 191-207.
- Thomas, D. R. (2003). A general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis. Retrieved 2013-09-24, from <http://www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/soph/centres/hrmas/docs/Inductive2003.pdf>
- Thomas, H. V., Lewis, G., Thomas, D. R., Salmon, R. L., Chalmers, R. M., Coleman, T. J., . . . Softley, P. (2003). Mental health of British farmers. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 60*(3), 181-185; discussion 185-186.
- Tremblay, G., Cloutier, R., Antil, T., Bergeron, M. E., & Lapointe-Goupil, R. (2005). *La santé des hommes au Québec [Men's health in the Province of Quebec]*. Sainte-Foy: Ministère de la santé et des services sociaux et Institut de la statistique du Québec,.
- Turcotte, D., F.-Dufour, I., & Saint-Jacques, M.-C. (2009). Les apports de la recherche qualitative en évaluation de programme [Contribution of qualitative research in program assessment]. In M. Alain & D. Dessureault (Eds.), *Élaborer et évaluer les programmes d'intervention psychosociale: une perspective transdisciplinaire [Elaborating and evaluating psychosocial intervention programs: a transdisciplinary perspective]*. Québec: Les Presses de l'Université du Québec.
- Whittemore, R., Chase, S. K., & Mandle, C. L. (2001). Validity in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Health Research, 11*(4), 522-537.
- Zijlstra, F. R. H., & Sonnentag, S. (2006). After work is done: Psychological perspectives on recovery from work. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 15*(2), 129-138. doi: 10.1080/13594320500513855